

THE VISUAL ARTS AND THE HEALING PROCESS

In the past, folklore, rituals, rites and the creative arts of many Siberian people made a significant contribution to the psycho-emotional state of their communities. This presentation makes connections between the visual arts and the healing process. It draws on Shamanism, transpersonal psychology and the visual arts, to make links between the visual arts, altered states of consciousness and the psycho-emotional state, health and well-being of people in a contemporary context. It is about the power, importance and magical nature of images and image-making – images as a source of knowledge that can take you on a journey that is both creative and healing if you allow that to happen and let the images lead the way. It suggests that the visual arts can be healing and transformative for the maker and the viewer, both personally and at a broad cultural level, in a way that is close to the ancient tradition of Shamanism, and that making art work could have an important role to play in the evolution of human consciousness.

The ideas presented here have grown out of:

(1) My own personal experiences as a practicing artist and lecturer in colleges of art and design in London.

(2) A long and substantial professional involvement with transpersonal psychology, as a counsellor/therapist and workshop leader.

(3) Research undertaken at the Royal College of Art in London and the University of Brighton between 1993 and 2007 that made bridges between transpersonal psychology and image-making. The research, which was both experiential and academic, focussed on the special qualities of the feminine principle in two-dimensional image-making.

(4) Some experiences of Shamanism gained during three visits to Russia and Siberia in 2001, 2003 and 2004.

I give lectures and run workshops based on my research in England and abroad and do a lot of art work on location in the landscape in Morocco. I also make artists' books.

In this presentation, I use the word healing in the sense of making whole. The process includes:

(1) Attending to our inner ecology and finding ways of re-balancing or re-connecting with aspects of ourselves that have become lost, fragmented, neglected or distorted for either personal or cultural reasons.

(2) Bridge-making. Finding ways of connecting or re-connecting with the universal source for the purposes of healing and restoring a harmonious connection with the world of nature.

(3) The catharsis or therapeutic release of emotional tension that can occur as a result of inner journeys. (*Villoldo and Krippner 1986*).

The connection between the visual arts and the healing process goes back to our roots and origins as human beings. In its origins, making art work was closely connected with Shamanism. In "Dreaming With Open Eyes. The Shamanic Spirit In Twentieth Century Art And Culture", Michael Tucker (*Tucker 1992*) describes two little Shaman-like figures on the walls of the pre-historic caves at Lascaux and Trois-Frères in South West France, that date from between fifteen and twenty thousand years ago. He says that these figures are "two of the earliest images known to us of the Shaman or Seer of ancient cultures. Charged with the responsibility of maintaining the health of the tribe, the pre-historic Shaman remains the archetype of all artists. Image-maker, dancer, drummer, actor and singer, healer and holy one,

the Shaman epitomises the human need to bridge worlds – to fly beyond the everyday realm of the visual to conjure worlds of visionary presence and power.”

My own thoughts and feelings about a connection between Shamanism and the visual arts were confirmed when I went to see the pre-historic cave paintings at Peche Merle in Cabrerets in France in 2004. I was very struck by the image of a hand on the cave wall and wonderful spotted horses that seem to be flying round the space, deep inside the earth. Anthropologists have suggested that for the artist who made the image it wasn't the end product as we understand it, that was important, but the process of making the image.

The artist placed his or her hand on the wall of the cave, a wall that was like a screen or membrane between this world and the other. The artist then blew pigment onto his or her hand, so that it merged with the wall of the cave, and the hand, empowered by the breath of life, made the connection with the world of spirit beyond the cave wall.

The artist then went on to make drawings with the hand and the pigment empowered by the world of spirit. The hand was the interface between the visible and the invisible worlds and the drawings created made the caves a sacred space that people could return to when they wanted to make the connection with the world of spirits once again, deep inside the earth. It seems likely that the artists were extraordinary people who either symbolically or in reality were able to travel spontaneously between this world and the other, and who had the capacity to anchor their experiences in very powerful imagery. (*Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2001*). Ethnologists have suggested that in Nevada, California, Shamans painted their visions on the rocks the day after their rituals took place and probably believed that if they didn't they would fall ill and die. The place they painted became charged with power and facilitated further Shamanic journeys.

In Western culture, the making of art work became separated from its roots and origins, and its connection with the earth. As part of the evolution of consciousness, human beings developed two very different but equally important ways of being in and perceiving the world – our capacity to feel connectedness and the inter-connectedness of everything, alongside our wonderful ability to separate out from our surroundings and use mind as a beam of light to shine on things. One of the major tasks we have today as human beings is to heal the splits that have resulted from this separation, splits between head/heart, mind/soul, the masculine and feminine principles. As our capacity to see from a distance evolved, certainly in the Western world, we lost touch with our rhythms and our roots. In the process, the feminine principle was badly damaged and images became under-valued compared with words and the rational mind. We have now largely lost the connection with the sacred dimension and images and symbols have become debased, relegated to the commercial world often as a device for marketing (*Slain 1998*). There are of course parts of the world where this has not happened in the same way.

But in Western culture, what could be called a Shamanistic sensibility has been re-surfacing since the end of the eighteenth century (*Flaherty 1992*), and trying to find a form and a voice. A Shamanic worldview is one in which everything is alive, interconnected and interrelated. Shamanism uses rituals for making a connection with other dimensions, other worlds, for the purpose of healing both individuals and communities. The world of modern science now tells us that we are the same as everything around us. In “Dreaming With Open Eyes”, Michael Tucker describes how artists in the twentieth century took on the role of the Shamans of pre-history and have contributed to the shift in consciousness that is so sorely needed today. At a EUROTAS (European Transpersonal Association) conference in Moscow in 2004, Vladimir Maykov described how transpersonal psychology has its roots in Shamanism and how Shamanism embodies an enormous amount of practical knowledge about ways of making bridges between this world and the world of spirit for the purposes of

healing. At the end of her book, “Shamanism And The Eighteenth Century”, Gloria Flaherty suggests that it may be time for what she called “a new Shamanology”.

Jung has said that we all carry within ourselves at some deep level memories of our origins as human beings that are still accessible to us today. He wrote that “Nothing to which the psyche belongs or which is part of the psyche is ever lost. To live fully, we have to reach down and bring back to life, the deepest levels of the psyche from which our present consciousness has evolved.” (*Jung 1961*)

As a visual artist working in the twenty-first century, I have always wanted to make artwork that connected with deeper meanings in some way. I have also always felt that magic comes out of my hands. My own special interest concerns the power, importance and magical nature of images and image-making. We all have within ourselves an often much neglected inner image-maker and we need to learn or re-learn to use that part of ourselves alongside our rational mind. Images say what cannot be said any other way. Anchoring and working visually and creatively with the images that reveal themselves to us and through us, can involve exploring a wide range of media and materials and doing a dance with all aspects of ourselves – thinking/feeling/sensation/intuition – in a flowing and dynamic relationship.

I know that healing in the sense of “making whole” happens through my creative work, certainly for me, perhaps for others. When I work in the landscape in the world ‘out there’ and I spend time finding a magic place to work – a place of power maybe – I feel a connection between me, the place and something beyond myself. The work takes over and seems to draw or paint itself. I feel vibrantly alive. I never know what will happen and I never know if I will ever be able to do it again. I also find it very helpful to work in big sketchbooks. I put everything into them – words, images, thoughts, feelings, dreams, postcards and press cuttings, as well as drawings and paintings. That helps me to get a sense of my own journey through life, a sense of important themes and images as they come to the surface and reveal themselves, a sense of a process at work within me that is in every way as important as any end product. The books also record the tussle I always experience between words and images.

I feel very strongly that when I am immersed in creative work, I am in some sort of altered or heightened state of consciousness that is very close to Shamanism. Its not the same, because Shamans go into a trance, but it is a state of being which is very focused, intuitive and meditative. I feel in touch with some sort of sacred space within myself that I am not normally aware of, that seems to get blocked out by day-to-day reality and the demands of necessity. It has been suggested to me that my experiences are closer to those of a traditional storyteller in which a door opens and things come through – the voice of the universe maybe. The story tells itself; the song sings itself; the image draws or paints itself. Perhaps what happens could be described as a Shamanistic sensibility at work within me.

There is also a connection between my work as an artist and the inner journeys I have made in the context of transpersonal psychology. I was introduced to transpersonal psychology by Barbara Somers and Ian Gordon-Brown, two pioneers of transpersonal psychology in England. Their workshops and training course were wonderfully poetic and imaginative, a rich mix of theory and practical explorations of inner worlds. They used visualisation, guided imagery, active imagination and dream-work to lead us into inner realms. These journeys took place lying down flat on the floor with our eyes closed. Through relaxation and meditation, we went into some sort of heightened or altered state of consciousness, somewhere between sleep, dreaming and being awake, once again with access to some part of ourselves that we are not normally aware of. We learned to anchor and work creatively with the images and symbols that came to the surface in these inner explorations, drawing, painting, using collage and a variety of media and materials. Drawing skills were not important, but the results were poetic and extraordinary. Often the work was accompanied by

a catharsis as people experienced a release of emotional tension. We learned to honour the aliveness of images, to dialogue with them and ask them what they want. Work of this nature is very powerful and should only be undertaken with a very experienced practitioner.

As a visual artist who has spent a lot of time exploring inner worlds, I rarely found that I could create art work out of guided imagery exercises, which are built around a storyline devised by a therapist or workshop leader. Active imagination is much closer to the way artists work spontaneously. In active imagination people start their journey with an image of their own choice and follow where that leads, This is what artists do, working in sketchbooks, focusing on the more formal aspects of making art work, creating variations on a theme, allowing the materials and media to take them on a journey. What I found is that inner journeys stimulate art work, which manifests in its own way later on and that meanings unfold in their own time without the need for pressurised conscious interpretations.

Shamanism, transpersonal psychology and the visual arts all give us different ways of entering into non-ordinary states of consciousness that allow us access to images and symbols that may well come from the same source. When I heard a Shaman in Moscow describe his journey in 2001, the language he used and the way he talked about his experiences sounded very similar to the way people described their inner journeys in the context of transpersonal psychology. In 2003, I had the opportunity to ask the same Shaman about the difference between a Shamanic journey and an imaging journey in the context of psychology. He suggested that the former was an out-of-body experience whereas the latter simply dealt with personal material. In 2004, I had the opportunity to go to two workshops given by Shamans in Moscow. Both of these, included imaging exercises that were very similar to inner explorations I have experienced in the context of transpersonal psychology.

Mircea Eliade has said that “Every human being tends even unconsciously towards the centre, where he can find integral reality or sacredness and that it depends on modern man to re-awaken the inestimable treasure of images that he carries within so as to contemplate them and assimilate their message.” He goes on to describe “the man without imagination” as “cut off from the deeper reality of life and from his own soul” (*Eliade 1991*).

At this point, I would like to tell you a little more about my own work. When I started my research, I couldn't make any headway with the project, but as soon as I began working with images in a sketchbook, the research lifted off and took me on what became a most extraordinary multi-dimensional journey that was at the same time, a literal, metaphorical, metaphysical, intellectual, creative, personal/emotional journey that linked psychology, spirituality and the visual arts. It was like flying on a magic carpet.

I found that images are very powerful and magical. They have a quicksilver quality and can take you on a wondrous journey that is both creative and healing if you have the courage to follow them and let them lead the way. They can tell you everything you need to know, long before ideas have crystallised in the form of words. Places and situations we respond to strongly in the world ‘out there’ often mirror inner landscapes – perhaps they are one and the same thing.

Images have the capacity to flow, transform, and change. Journeying in inner realms can lead us from our inner world into the world ‘out there’ and that in turn leads us back into inner realms once more. As I worked, I realised that some of my images carried secret meanings that I was not aware of when I created them, but I only discovered this retrospectively.

I made connections between transpersonal psychology, the feminine principle, Shamanism and the visual arts. I became aware of the existence of an imaginal realm that goes beyond everyday imagination that is connected with the world of spirit or whatever is ‘out there’ that appears to communicate to us and through us in the form of images.

In an article entitled “The Presence Of Other Worlds In Psychotherapy And Healing”, Roger Woolger (*Woolger 2001*) describes how Jung developed the technique of Active Imagination as a way of connecting with the image or spirit forms that he called archetypes that reside in the collective unconscious. He goes on to discuss the work of Henry Corbin, a great scholar of Sufism, who makes a distinction between imaginary and imaginal. Corbin described the former as fantasies we create with our rational working mind whereas the imaginal derives from the higher reality of spiritual imagination. Once we have learned to connect with this very powerful form of awareness we can journey between realities and encounter worlds beyond the physical world where we have access to the universal source of healing. The imaginal world is known by many names in different spiritual traditions. This faculty is the creative imagination, the imaginal power by which spirit acts through us. Corbin says that the world these pure forms inhabit is “a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state”. His work amplifies the nature of visionary or mystical journeys. It is very clear that these journeys are the same as Shamanic journeys to upper or lower worlds.

The imaginal realm is a sacred space. When we are being truly creative and completely absorbed in making art work, we move into that space. Often the art work takes over and appears to create itself. We move out of secular time into sacred time. In this state we can be most truly ourselves and also make the connection with other realities. Rituals can be an important way of helping us to enter into that realm. When I make art work on location in the landscape, I spend a long time finding the right place to work – a place with a heart. Before I start working, I honour the place and the materials. I ask the spirits of the place for help. I ask my own inner self for help. Sometimes, my husband Ali makes a bunch of flowers from the area and we leave them behind as an offering to the spirits when the drawing or painting is completed.

The process of image works within us, not just as therapy, but as the process of life itself unfolding and telling us about itself and ourselves. Hands are an interface between the visible and the invisible, just as they were on the cave walls at Peche Merle and the pre-historic goddess temple at Catal Huyuk in Turkey – healing hands that feel in touch, creating the images of life coming through us. We are part of a vast multi-dimensional web that is changing, evolving and breathing all the time. We are not just part of what Jung called the collective unconscious but something bigger and deeper. We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. We are made of seawater and stardust. We are part of life unfolding on this planet, and as Chief Seattl, an American Indian, said in a speech to the President of the United States of America in 1854, “Everything is connected”. One of the best ways to explore, express and celebrate our connectedness with our inner worlds, each other, and the world around us and beyond us is through metaphor, through the language of the arts.

The images that come through us can be healing and transformative for the person who creates them and they can also have the power to work as healing images for people who contemplate them and allow their magic to work. Through making art work, it is possible to connect with the sacred in an authentic and contemporary way and at the same time to heal some of the splits and imbalances that are the source of many psycho-emotional problems in the contemporary world.

Before I finish, I would like to show you some images of art work that are relevant to this presentation.

- (1) Recent research into the Russian artist, Kandinsky (the so-called father of modern art) suggests that his work was profoundly influenced by Shamanism. Originally an ethnographer, his art work gave form to his early experiences of Shamanism throughout his life (*Weiss 1995*).

(2) Photographs and films of the American abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock reveal a ritualistic approach to his paintings which he almost seems to dance into life.

(3) Mark Rothko's colour paintings represent pure feeling states. They are like veils of colour that you feel you could walk through into another world.

Nos 4, 5 and 6 are examples of three women artists who transformed intense personal suffering through their creative process:

(4) Frieda Kahlo was a Mexican painter. A terrible accident when she was 18 left her physically disabled and in pain for most of her life, but she was able to channel those experiences into vibrant creative art work.

(5) Charlotte Salomon who was German Jewish, died in Auschwitz aged 26. All the women in her family committed suicide and she herself contemplated suicide. Instead she transformed her emotional suffering through art work.

(6) Niki de St. Phalle was half French and half American. She started painting when she went through a psycho-emotional breakdown in her early 20s. She said that painting healed her. She described the Tarot Garden she created in Italy as being "for all the women who over so many centuries were not allowed to create and if they dared, they were burnt as witches or locked up in a madhouse. The garden is a homage to them and to an ancient lost wisdom".

(7) The work of a young contemporary Hungarian photographer, Andrea Batorfi for whom the creative process is a magical activity through which forms from another reality find expression.

(8) Examples of so-called Outsider Art – art made by people who have had no formal art training.

(9) Images from the Prinzhorn collection – art work that was a lifeline for people incarcerated in a mental hospital in Switzerland in the early years of the twentieth century.

(10) Carpets made by Berber women in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. These are made from natural materials and are deeply connected to the earth. They are full of healing symbols.

(11) Examples of my own creative work based on a theme I called Magic Garden.

(12) Art work made by children in Ireland as part of the Pushkin Project, a project that has existed in schools in Ireland for the last twenty-one years. This project, also linked with schools in St. Petersburg, was originally built around a prize for creative writing in Irish schools. It was then extended to include the visual arts. It now also works with adults and business organisations in addition to school children. It has made a valuable contribution to the peace process in Ireland as well as having a profound effect on all the individuals involved.

Finally, I would just like to say that what really matters is the how you actually put these ideas into practice. Unfortunately there isn't time to discuss this now, but further information about related workshops is available on request.

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